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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the School Community Partnership Development (SCPD) and the Deaf Parent to Hearing Parent Project (DPHPP), which are sources for school improvement and parent education and for the organization and empowerment of communities for long-term change. Families involved in the SCPD engage in math and science activities throughout their children's education. The program is designed to enable parents to be co-participants in school change for improved math and science education at home and school. Through SCPD, parents develop their capacity for leadership within the school and their ability to strategize for change within school structures. The DPHPP focuses on improved family and school life and learning for students who are deaf; 90 percent of whom are born to hearing parents whose knowledge of deafness is based on a societal view of deafness as a disability. Most recently, the research and education communities have begun looking to deaf parents who have raised deaf children to understand the indigenous knowledge they bring to raising deaf children. The DPHPP brings both groups of parents together for workshops developed and run by deaf parents and professionals. The workshops help create one community of parents raising deaf children. (Contains 31 references.) (SM)

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Inviting Families and Community Members to the Table

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Inviting Parents and Communities to the Table

Introduction

"I was up at the school last week. Now they know me up there. They know that I have some talents, and a special interest in chess. But what did the teacher ask me to do, she said, "Mr. Nelson, could you go make copies of these papers for me?"

Walter, a Jacobs Elementary School parent[1]

With heartfelt sincerity and deep passion school staff talk of their desire for greater involvement from parents and community members. At the national level, the U.S. Department of Education formalized this commitment with the report, Strong Families, Strong Schools (1994), while at the local level site-based decision-making has legitimized the role of parent and community in influencing schools. Interest in involving parents[ii] and community members in schools has increased over the past few decades (see, for example, Lightfoot, 1975; Clark, 1983; Comer, 1986; Epstein, 1986, 1995). Meanwhile, as interest has increased, the understanding of what constitutes family-school-community partnerships has broadened and deepened. "Parent involvement" was once considered a nice add-on, if schools were fortunate enough to have the "right" kind of parent who would, without question, support the school's goals. And "good" communities (with community defined as the geographic area surrounding the school) would pitch in for special events and projects. Family-school-community partnership has, more recently shifted to become a core element of educational reform (Sarason, 1990; Fullan, 1991; Hulsebosch, 1991, 1992).

The understanding of what families and communities can contribute has also shifted, from one of benign support, to one in which all members of the school community (now defined as all groups with an interest in the education of the children in the school) contribute in ways that reflect their varying interests, strengths, needs, and resources. Fueling this has been an awareness of the need for pedagogy that is more culturally relevant to students. One way of bridging the gaps which often exist between the

knowledge and experience of teachers, and the learning strengths and needs of their students, is to develop partnerships with the adults who know them best and can act as cultural translators (Cummins, 1989; Delpit, 1995; Moll, 1992; Hulsebosch, 1996). For most children, partnerships between teachers and parents[iii] best serve this function. Parents, with their intimate knowledge of their children, typically offer "funds of knowledge" (Moll, 1992) derived from homes and communities which schools can tap for teaching and learning. Parents also act as mediators between the home and community environments, and the world of schools (Concha Delgado-Gaitan, 1992).

In some schools, however, parents are not available, due to long work hours or because their time is consumed meeting life's basic needs. In other schools, such as schools for deaf students, parents, most of whom will be hearing, may be available but may not yet be able to provide the needed information about Deaf culture. In schools such as these, community members, rather than parents, may be needed to help bridge school and community cultures.

With the shifts in understanding of what family-school-community partnership means, in terms of its value and its shape, have come new expectations that schools find ways to proactively reach out to families and schools in ways that are meaningful, not only to the school, but to the communities and families as well. Schools and school personnel are often already overwhelmed with increasing expectations for what they must accomplish. In addition, most school personnel are ill prepared to encourage family involvement in schools, let alone develop partnerships with families and communities (Shartrand, Weiss, Kreider and Lopez, 1997). Some schools respond to this dilemma by hiring community members or parents as parent liasons, who them become a member of the school staff. In at least some instances, however, these parent liasons become so much a part of school culture that they "forget where they came from ." In doing so, they become socialized into the norms and values of schools and a deficit perspective on parents (Hulsebosch and Logan, 1998).

This paper describes two projects, School Community Partnership Development (SCPD) and the Deaf Parent to Hearing Parent Project (DPHPP), which, from the outside, seem like simple family education programs. Upon closer examination, however, we can see that these projects are not only sources for school improvement and parent education, but also for the organization and empowerment of communities for long-term change.

Family Math and Family Science

Bringing Parents to the Table

Yolanda Simmons and Ariel Fuentes, parents from McMurphy Elementary, are watching the clock as they count supplies out onto tables: spoons, glue, borax, dishwashing soap, plastic bags, construction paper...and more. In forty-five minutes the room will fill with families and children wondering what glue and soap have to do with science.

The first hurdle to overcome in any effort to engage (or reengage) parents and community members is to convince them that the effort will be time well spent (Hulsebosch, 1993). For the School Community Partnership Development project, Family Math and Family Science are the curricular components which bring parents "to the table" for partnership with the school. Parents come because they know that math and science are important. When asked to become involved in improving math and science instruction, they feel that they are being taken seriously and the work they will be doing has the potential to be meaningful for their own child, as well as the entire school. As Loretta says, "Sometimes we get so beat up out there in the school world....But when we come together you know you can really accomplish those things you set out to do."[iv]

In Family Math and Family Science Leadership Courses, parent leaders learn to lead hands-on courses for families. Parents and community members involved in the School Community Partnership Development (SCPD) engage in math and science activities at every step of the way. Each time parents attend an SCPD meeting, workshop, or institute, they walk into a room with hands-on activities spread out on tables around the room.

Parents who have been involved with SCPD for some time greet them at the door and invite them to try out the activities. Later in the gathering there is time to discuss these activities: how they experienced them, what was challenging, what was interesting. There is also time during the meeting to learn another new math or science game with a group, and then break up and teach what they've learned to other science game with a group, and then break up and teach what they've learned to other parents through the cooperative learning "jigsaw" strategy (Aronson and Patnoe, 1997). Through these activities parents have experience with the language, tools, and concepts of math and science.

In the beginning, parents come, in spite of discomfort with the topics, because they are convinced that math and science are important for the future of their children. According to Bruce Rickley, the SCPD Developer:

So many people come in with phobias, because schools have done a job. When you first mention [math and science] to people, they actually move away from the table. The idea of having fun with it and seeing it as natural is at first foreign...But if you can get parents to have an ah-hah experience with it... They come away from these experiences with not only a recommitment to the importance of math and science, but also with an excitement for and comfort with math and science which is sometimes new to them.

Loretta, a parent at Findley school, echoes this when she says:

[My principal] kept saying, 'Loretta, they're gonig to give you $25. [in stipend to attend the Math workshop]', and I said, 'You know what, math and science -- it ain't worth $25. It's just not worth it', because I was one of these people when they say science fair I got butterflies in my stomach...He said the two most negative things he could say to me and it was math and science.

Loretta goes on to say:

But it really wasn't like I expected. They had done a couple of activities and I found it wasn't really like I thought in my mind math to be. We actually had a calculator, you know, and it wasn't like you got that wrong type of thing that makes me shun away. Because I'm not a quick thinker when it comes to math. I'm not quick with numbers. But this was different.

Building enthusiasm among parents and community members for mathematics and science is not difficult. Parents see the connections of math and science to their everyday

lives, and carry the activities they've enjoyed so much back into their homes and communities. Loretta tells a story of using a probability game she had learned at a Family Math Workshop with her family members , with the loser doing the dishes for the night, will do the dishes, and Bonita talks about how she comes home excited, saying to her two children, "I learned a real fun game at [the Teachers Academy] and I'll show it to you later on.". Rickley adds:

And we've found that parents are the fastest at transfer. More than half [of the parents] go back and use it in their communities within twenty-four hours [after coming to a Family Math or Science Workshop]....with their neighbors, janitors, in their churches.

But the goal of the SCPD model is not simply to enrich individual families. It is also to enable the parents to be co-participants in school change for improved math and science education at home and school. While parents are learning about math and science through constructivist approaches, teachers and administrators from the school are also engaged in parallel kinds of development processes. Meanwhile, all members of the school community are discussing ways to restructure their school to maximize everyone's contributions. The result of this parallel process is that parents learn the language of curricular school reform and constructivist mathematics and science.

Participatory Structures

You know, sometimes some of the stuff is new to you. It has you stuttering and stammering, 'Can we do that? Will we do that? Should be do that? Do we want to do that?' ....Because we're in our homes and we've done [what we've done at home] for so long to where we feel secure about that but anything outside of that we're not absolutely positive about what roles we should take. ...Sometimes you feel like you're treading on dangerous territory and sometimes you are because now it's this big picture about parent involvement. (Tamara Gaynor, Freemont Elementary parent)

When parents respond to schools' invitation to provide Family Math and Family Science leadership by planning and implementing workshops for families at the school, they encounter organizational structures through which they can learn, first hand, about

school improvement. In order to transform a Family Math Workshop from idea to event, parents soon learn to work their way through Local School Councils, budgets, constituencies, hierarchies, and School Improvement Plans.

At our board [Local School Council] meetings it was a time when the parents would just sit there and never have a word or [a] say so until that meeting was over..So one day I went to the meeting and I stood and I told them, 'Why are we here. We're not voicing our opinion until the end, but it's too late then.' I said, 'I feel like after each question's put up we should have our say so whether we want it passed or not, because we're parents...And they changed their ways so now parents see if they come they have can have a voice. (Maggy Brandon, Danforth Elementary parent)

Through the School Community Partnership Development process parents develop their capacity for leadership within the school, and their abilities to strategize for change within school structures. The immediate goal of SCPD for parents and community members is to take what they've learned in FM and FS Workshops back to their school community by conducting FM/FS Workshops with families at the school. An over-arching goal is to shift the perception that school personnel and the parents themselves often have of parents as unable to learn and teach their children math and science, to one in which all partners see themselves and one another as capable of math and science instruction and support. Another goal is to change the relationship between parents and schools from one of involvement to partnership for school change.

Through learning and leading Family Math and Family Science workshops, the processes of professional development are demystified as parents themselves become leaders of workshops for families. Parents, most of whom live in the most economically devasted areas of the city, have not before believed they had a right to engage with schools for school improvement. Yet, they begin to see themselves as legitimate participants, able to demand a high quality education for their children.

Deaf Parent to Hearing Parent Project

<u>Learning from the Experts</u>

"It (the workshop) reminded me know much I forgot to <u>just</u> play with my son. I'm always saying "no" to him."

Improved learning is often the magnet that draws families, as well as community members, into schools. But for families of young deaf children, something as basic as communication is the first step and entry point into the vital learning that takes place in homes. Just as with SCPD mathematics and science were the draw, with the Deaf Parent to Hearing Parent Project (DPHPP), basic communication and literacy are the magnets that draw community members and parents. But, while in SCPD parents and community members were often synonymous, with the DPHPP they are usually two distinct groups.

The DPHPP focuses on improved family and school life and learning for deaf children, 90% of whom are born to hearing parents whose knowledge of deafness is based in a societal view of deafness as a disability. The construction of deafness as a category of disability is in contrast to the construction of Deaf as members of a linguistic minority with a concomitant culture.[v] Approximately 10% of deaf children are born to Deaf parents. Deaf parents raising deaf children bring to child-rearing years of implicit as well as explicit experience, knowledge, and attitudes about what it means to be Deaf. For deaf parents, their deaf children are 'normal' and they look forward to sharing their life experiences via their common language.

For years hearing parents of deaf children have turned to hearing experts (usually in the field of medicine) for insights on how to best raise their children. More recently, the research and education communities have begun to look to Deaf parents who have raised deaf children to understand the indigenous knowledge they bring to child-rearing. Deaf parents who have raised deaf children can provide valuable insights into the strengths and needs of deaf children. Yet, they have seldom been sought out for their expertise. One reason is that parents, particularly parents of disenfranchised groups (such as low-income, language diverse, or African-American) who are seen as troubled and troubling

are seldom sought out as resources on their children (Auerbach, 1989; Delgado-Gaitan, 1990; Delpit, 1995).

The Deaf Parent to Hearing Parent Project began from a desire to tap into the resources of the local Deaf community in the interest of supporting the knowledge, skills and networks of hearing parents raising deaf children. Project workshops use a curriculum generated by Deaf parents, and are lead by Deaf professionals and Deaf parent volunteers. Workshops for parents create an environment where parents can reconnect with the pleasures of parenthood. Children are present and take part in all activities, working alongside with parents. The curriculum focuses on depathologizing the Deaf experience and helping parents to better understand the "realities" of their child's life.

In the workshops Deaf adults share cultural/ communication differences. For example, Deaf people naturally follow the eye line when trying to figure out what a child wants. Hearing people tend to rely on the gestures that children make. Thus when a child who has no language is crying for something to eat he points to the shelf and throws a tantrum. His or her hand is pointing and moving around while he becomes more upset . A deaf person tends to draw an invisible line from the child's eye to where he is looking. Then asks, pointing, is this what you want. This approach works well since children tend to get fixed on what they want and their eye is likely to remain on the item while the body is moving all over the place. The end result deaf parents find the item sooner then hearing parents with less frustration for both parties.

Community Organizing/Community Building

For deaf adults, as well as parents of deaf children, communication is the first and foremost challenge throughout most of their lives. The Deaf Parent Project began with the stated goal of strengthening communication, thereby strengthening all other aspects of family living and learning. In the process of developing an indigenous curriculum, rooted in the lives of Deaf parents, Deaf parents organized themselves and their knowledge to

become part of the more formal curriculum of schools. In fact, workshops that were intended only for parents of deaf children, began to also be attended by teachers at these school sites. Furthermore, a larger community, of parents raising deaf children, began to be organized as deaf and hearing parents shared common interests and concerns.

Conclusion

As with SCPD and Family Math and Family Science, the Deaf Parent Project was begun by people outside the immediate schools. In the case of SCPD the "outsiders" were themselves parents of children in the city school system who had a background in community organizing. With DPHPP the "outsiders" were members of the Deaf community who also had background in community work. In both projects the parents and community members, who had previously been thought of (and had often thought of themselves) as having little to offer schools, became resources to the school community. But, rather than doing so solely on the schools' terms, they contributed from positions of strength.

Current rhetoric in school reform maintains the need for strong relations between school, families and communities. The call for partnership among families, schools, and communities is prevalent. However, despite evidence of the value of these relations, "the potential is still largely ignored in schools" (Shartrand, Weiss, Kreider and Lopez, 1997). While there has been an increasing call for teacher preparation for involvement family members (Chavkin, 1991; Shartrand, et. al., ibid.) little has been said about sources for empowering parents in the relationship.

This paper proposes a model of community organizing as one which may be fruitful for strengthening family-school-community partnerships. Community organizing, with its use of "outside agitators", its focus on the strengths of a community, and its emphasis on community empowerment, focuses on an often ignored resource available to schools.

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[i] All quotes are by parents working with the School-Community Partnership Development (SCPD) described in this paper, unless otherwise noted. . All parent and school names are pseudonyms. The use of first names in the paper is consistent with the form of address in SCPD interactions. Although mindful of the misuse of first names by European-Americans working in African-American and Latino communities, SCPD staff are also aware of the use of titles to distance school personnel from family and community members. Thus, SCPD staff have a commitment to the use of first names in the interest of promoting a school-community.

[ii] As Milbrey McLauglin and Patrick Shields reminded us in 1987, "The middle and upper classes have long had both implicit avenues of involvement (easy and comfortable access to teachers and administrators) and explicit means of participation (parent/teacher associations, for example) - but less-advantaged parents have been unwilling or unable to use these modes of participation. In the mid-1960's educators and policy-makers focused on parent involvement as a promising way to improve educational outcomes for poor or underachieving students, and they developed a variety of models and strategies to promote such involvement (pp. 156-7).

[iii] We use term "parents" to signify adult caregivers in a child's life, be they grandparents, foster parents, or other extended family members.

[iv] Interview: LH, 1996:3

[v] There is a growing practice of capitalizing Deaf when referring to this second construction. That practice will be followed in this paper.